DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 251 333 SO 015 930

AUTHOR Schnell, Jim
TITLE The Personal Effects of Participant Observation on the Participant Observer.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 16p.; Document contains light, broken print.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; *Participant Observation; Personal Narratives; *Researchers; Research Methodology; Research Needs; *Self Concept; *Social Science Research; Values

ABSTRACT

Personal effects felt by participant-observers as a result of their research and the impact of such effects on researcher self-concept are analyzed. Quotes from participant-observers who have studied various social phenomena indicate that they experienced transition and conflict between their observer and participant roles. At times they were strangers (observers) to those they were researching and at other times friends (participants). Personal effects and subsequent self-concept alternations occurred. For example, one researcher did field work involving mentally disabled individuals. He became so involved that his family ended up providing a home for one of the disabled girls. The author experienced a change in self-concept as a result of his research, which showed that counter-culture groups use the same approaches as the dominant culture to solve conflicts. Prior to his study he had very strongly associated himself with the counter-culture, but his personal orientation shifted away from this identification during the study. The conclusion is that personal effects of research should be acknowledged and discussed. (RM)

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The Personal Effects of Participant Observation on the Participant Observer

Jim Schnell
1984

This article analyzes personal effects which have been felt by participant observers, as a result of their research, and discusses the impact of such effects on researcher self-concept. This discussion includes a description of the author's experiences as a participant observer and the subsequent personal effects which have been felt by the author. The acknowledgement of such personal effects is important as all researchers, qualitative and quantitative, are exposed to a variety of findings which can affect personal perspectives.

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The Personal Effects of Participant Observation on the Participant Observer

There are two primary research bases in the social sciences. Johnson (1975, p. x) defines these bases, qualitative and quantitative research, as follows. Qualitative research affords an indepth, detailed, descriptive account of social actions occurring at a specific time and place. Quantitative research usually involves statistical measurements of various kinds which are cross tabulated with one another to explain the variability of a social event.

Further distinctions between the qualitative and quantitative approaches can be seen in the perspective provided by Labovitz and Hagedorn (1971). "Qualitative measurement involves distinguishing one class of objects from another, differentiating not in magnitude but in quality or kind" (p. 66). There is no "more or less" dimension. Quantitative measurement involves variance in magnitude (greater or smaller amounts). This type of measurement occurs by 1) direct enumeration (where the item is counted), 2) the use of a standard unit by which objects are measured, 3) using an index that is a measurable indicator of social phenomena, or 4) ranking a series of objects (Labovitz and Hagedorn, 1971, p. 66).

From the above, one can infer there are various advantages and disadvantages with both approaches. Although the qualitative approach offers a natural setting, there is also a lack of reliability resulting from random observations. Although the quantitative approach offers more control over the intervention of variables, such an approach lacks realism due to its artificiality (Labovitz and Hagedorn, 1971, p. 66).

This article will focus on participant observation, a particular approach within qualitative research, and the effect it can have on the self-concept of the participant observer. "Notwithstanding, participant observation has extremely great potential for communication research, because it can give the researcher detailed knowledge of communication processes in context" (Poole, Note 1). Participant observation allows for, what Howard S. Becker underlines as, "rich experiential context" of observation of the event and observation of previous and following events (Filstead, 1970, p. 141).

Gerry Philipsen used participant observation in "Speaking 'Like a Man' in Teamsterville" (1975). He was interested in finding what groups in the United States view speaking as an effective means of social influence. Philipsen states there is a lack of information in this area and this deficit "should be remedied by descriptive and comparative studies of American speech communities" (Philipsen, 1975, p. 22).

I believe researcher who undertake participant observation studies are likely to experience an altered self-concept as a result of their field experience. The degree of alteration is correlated with the degree of personal involvement.

Herbert Gans describes three types of roles within participant observation.

> One is the total participant, the fieldworker who is completely involved emotionally in a social situation and who only after it is over becomes a researcher again and writes down what has happened. . . . A second is the researcher-participant, who participates in a social situation but is personally only partially

> involved so that he can function as a researcher. . . .
>
> The third is the total researcher, who observes without any personal involvement in the situation under study. (Gans, 1968, pp. 302-303)

These three roles indicate various degrees of personal involvement.

Review of participant observation studies reveals a tendency, of participant observers, to describe specific procedures, but to provide less frequent discussion of personal experiences.

> Reports about field research usually describe the methods and techniques of the research. Less often do they tell of the researcher's social and emotional experience. . . . These topics are more often discussed in personal conversations between field researchers than written about in the literature. (Shaffir, Stebbins, and Turowetz, 1980, p. vii)

I have been surprised at the lack of discussion of personal experiences by participant observers. "What good is a research design that does not include some reference to those who will execute it" (Hughes, 1964, p. 82) or who have executed it?

"There is a revival of participant observation research . . . exemplified by anthologies in which sociologists report on how they conducted their studies, and how they felt while doing so" (Gans, 1968, p. 300). This article will analyze personal effects felt by participant observers, as a result of their research, and seek to understand the impact of such effects on researcher self-concept. This discussion will include a description of my experiences as a participant observer and the subsequent personal effects I have felt.

A primary form of personal involvement occurs when the distinction

between objective observation and subjective participation is not clear. This dilemma is inherent within participant observation. "The outstanding peculiarity of this method is that the observer, in greater or less degree, is caught up in the very web of social interaction which he observes, analyzes, and reports" (Hughes, 1960, p. xiv). "Social fieldwork . . . makes the investigator both an observer and a participating inhabitant of the community" (Kloos, 1969, p. 509). "Standard accounts of the method of participant observation require, I would argue, an anthropological observer to be both a stranger and a friend among the people he is studying" (Jarvie, 1969, p. 505). There is considerable opportunity for the participant observer to experience corflict between his/her goals as an observer and his/her goals as a participant.

Review of participant observation literature indicates subjects generally respond to participant observers, in the long term, as participants (rather than observers). "Because he is a participant, even if he announces to people that he is there to study them (as I did most of the time in all my fieldwork) people soon forget why he is there, and react to him as a participant" (Gans, 1968, p. 305). "His adaptation to local conditions requires that he become acutely aware of the pitfalls that may transform him from an observer and analyst to an overly involved, identified participant" (Glazer, 1972, p. 67).

A variety of participant observers, who have studied various social phenomena, indicate a transition and conflict between their observer and participant roles. The transition and conflict involves the extremes of being a stranger (observer) and being a friend (participant). Personal effects, and subsequent self-concept alterations, can occur within the

participant observer during involvement with the studied phenomena, even though the participant observer may be fully aware of his/her observation and participation goals. Mere exposure can manipulate, positively or negatively, the frame of reference of the participant observer.

Blanche Geer explains changes which were felt after three days of fieldwork in a college environment.

> Before entering the field, I thought of them as irresponsible children. But as I listened to their voices, learned their language, witnessed gesture and expression, and accumulated the bits of information about them which bring people alive and make their problems real, I achieved a form of empathy with them and became their advocate. (Geer, 1967, pp. 394-395)

She reports observers who began work months later experienced the same change, but not until they entered the field. Reading her fieldnotes did little to provide a base for the change.

Barrie Thorne researched the draft resistance movement in Boston during the Vietnam War. Her inner-conflict between her goals as a participant and as an observer are apparent within her discussion of her personal experience as a participant observer. "The conflicts I experienced between being a committed participant and an observing sociologist often took the form of great pangs of guilt, and a sense that I was betraying the movement" (Thorne, 1979, p. 83).

Robert Bogdan did fieldwork involving mentally disabled individuals. He explains an instance where the gap between stranger (observer) and friend (participant) was bridged. "When we were told that Pattie wanted to leave the state school but had no place to go, we began looking around

for a family that might be willing to provide a place for her to stay. We found a home; it was mine" (Bogdan, 1980, p. 240).

Morris Schwartz describes his interactions with subjects in "The Mental Hospital: The Research Person in the Disturbed Ward." "They attacked me verbally and sometimes physically. At first I reacted with concern, guilt, resentment, and the wish to disappear from the scene" (Schwartz, 1964, p. 94). Schwartz's experience evidences a field situation where the objective-subjective distinction would be consistently tested.

William F. Whyte, in Streetcorner Society, acknowledges the personal involvement of the participant observer.

> He has a role to play, and he has his own personality needs that must be met. . . . his personal life is inextricably mixed with his research. A real explanation . . . involves a rather personal account of how the researcher lived during the period of study. (Whyte, 1955, p. 279)

Whyte points out "that the researcher, like his informants, is a social animal" (p. 279).

My experience with participant observation occurred during my doctoral dissertation research. Participant observation was my primary method for data collection. The problem of the study dealt with conflict resolution communication attempts practiced by the Woodstock Food Cooperative (a pseudonym). I wanted to find if the ideals of the counterculture were evidenced in the communication attempts at conflict resolution. The Co-op presented itself as being based on a countercultural philosophy and was studied as a representative organization of the counterculture.

Results of the study indicate the Co-op only superficially practiced a countercultural philosophy. The Co-op presented itself as using a consensus process in formal situations, but analysis found it actually used a form of voting. The Co-op presented itself as egalitarian, in informal situations, but analysis found it actually had a recognized hierarchy among the membership. Thus, the Co-op presented itself as practicing a countercultural philosophy, but analysis found it actually practiced dominant culture approaches in communication attempts at conflict resolution.

The hypothesis of the study was not found to be true. I had expected to find that the Co-op, as a representative organization within the counterculture, would utilize a consensus process in formal situations and practice egalitarian ideals in informal situations. I was both academically and personally surprised when my data disproved my hypothesis.

As an individual who associates himself with the counterculture and believes the counterculture offers a necessary alternative, I personally hoped there would be stronger distinctions between the counterculture and dominant culture conflict resolution communication attempts. This would have indicated a stronger distinction between the philosophies of the counterculture and dominant culture. The discovery that such strong distinctions do not exist has affected the author's evaluation of one of his primary groups and has in turn affected his self-concept.

Prior to executing the study, I had been involved with a variety of organizations within the counterculture for roughly three years. I associated myself with the counterculture very strongly during those

years, both in thought and appearance. Three years before starting the study, I quit cutting my hair and I did not get another haircut until after the study was complete.

I did not grow my hair long to enhance my countercultural credibility at the Co-op. Rather, I quit getting haircuts when I was released from active duty as an Air Force Second Lieutenant. The release was under honorable conditions and was sanctioned through an Air Force program which allowed officers to return to graduate school, but still maintain their position in the inactive reserve. My hair growth and countercultural leanings were in response to the perceived impersonal bureaucracy which this researcher experienced while in the Air Force. I did not experience serious disagreement with the goals of the military, rather, I experienced Roszak's explanation of the counterculture. Roszak (1969, p. 2) explains counterculture as arising from a youthful revulsion at technocracy. It represents a refusal to surrender spontaneity to artificiality. The counterculture serves to reassert life and joy in the face of impersonal organization.

During the early months of the study, I concentrated on achieving as high a degree of objectivity as possible. I did not want my personal countercultural leanings to influence my academic observations. I wanted the data to speak for itself and it did. My data (from observations, interviews, surveys, and review of literature written by/about the organization) indicated the countercultural base of the Co-op, and related organizations, was much more superficial than anticipated. The superficial trends were consistently evident from the start of the study.

The consistencies in the data encouraged me academically, but

discouraged me personally. I initially questioned the sincerity of the counterculture and then began to question my future personal involvement with the counterculture. Could I better achieve my altruistic aims through a different means? I had originally identified strongly with the Co-op membership, and related organizations, but my personal orientation shifted away from this identification during the study. The shift was evidenced in my personal journal.

> My views have changed since I started the study. The distinctions between dominant culture organizations and countercultural organizations seem to be superficial. I think I can promote more (realistic) social change by working within the system than by working outside of it. Some may call it "selling out." I'll call it disillusionment. The goals are still the same . . . I think I'll just try another path for awhile. (Fieldnotes, Note 2)

This personal questioning occurred, little by little, during the course of the data gathering period, rather than through an abrupt realization.

Rosalie Wax shares a similar experience in "Final Thoughts: How Fieldwork Changed Me."

> For what I realized was that I had not been greatly changed by the things I suffered, enjoyed, or endured; nor was I greatly changed by the things I did (though these strengthened my confidence in myself). What changed me irrevocably and beyond repair were the things I learned. More specifically, these irrevocable changes involved replacing mythical and ideological assumptions with the correct (though often painful) facts of the situation. (Wax, 1971, p. 363)

As with Wax, what changed me irrevocably were the things I learned.

These changes involved replacing personal ideological assumptions "with the correct (though often painful) facts of the situation."

The strongest irrevocable change occurred near the end of the data gathering period. I had just finished filing my annual federal income tax forms when I questioned the paradox of working for peace (through the counterculture) while paying for war (through taxes). It was apparent to me that most of my countercultural colleagues, except for the handful of war tax resisters I knew of, were caught in this contradiction. I could see little rationale in working to counter a system which I was financially supporting. My subsequent direction, since this learning experience, has been to work for change within the system.

The study has been completed for seven months and I have reflected on my fieldwork experience a good deal. It was academically rewarding, as a Ph.D. dissertation, and it was equally personally rewarding as a learning experience. My initial motivation in doing research for this article stemmed from an interest in learning about the personal experiences of other participant observers and to see what consistencies, if any, exist among people who have used the participant observation method.

Participant observation has been used by a variety of researchers, in all areas of the social sciences, to investigate a wide diversity of research problems. It is difficult to speculate on the psychological make-up of participant observers. A common thread which does exist within most participant observation accounts is the concern with objectivity. Not necessarily achieving total objectivity, but consistently working to maintain a high degree of it. This would require a particular ability to periodically detach oneself from ones

personal frame of reference. "It is doubtful whether one can become a good social reporter unless he has been able to look, in a reporting mood, at the social world in which he was reared" (Hughes, 1960, p. xi).

As a participant observer who associates himself with the counterculture, and who has done fieldwork within the counterculture, I am particularly interested in Herbert Gans discussion of fieldworkers.

> My hunch is that fieldwork attracts a person who, in Everett Hughes' words, "is alienated from his own background," who is not entirely comfortable in his new roles, or who is otherwise detached from his own society; the individual who is more comfortable as an observer than as a participant. (Gans, 1968, p. 317)

The alienation emphasized by Hughes parallels the alienation frequently felt within the counterculture (Roszak, 1969, p. 2).

I believe concern with the personal effects of a method, in this case participant observation, is central to understanding the entire research process. "What good is a research design that does not include some reference to those who will execute it" (Hughes, 1964, p. 82) or who have executed it? My review of the literature reveals a minimal fund of information regarding the personal effects of such research. This article is intended as a contribution to the fund.

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Reference Notes

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2. Fieldnotes. February 5, 1982. Reflections on my personal involvement as a participant observer.